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## The Alleged Murder of Hrethric in *Beowulf*

By Marijane Osborn

ABSTRACT: A scenario well-known to *Beowulf* scholars alleges that after Beowulf has slain the monsters and gone home, Hrothulf, nephew of the Danish king Hrothgar, will murder prince Hrethric to gain the throne when the old king dies. This story, that many Anglo-Saxonists assume is integral to the ancient legend of these kings, is a modern misreading of the poet's allusions to events associated with the Scylding dynasty—a legendary history that the poet arguably takes care to follow. The present essay, in two parts, first shows how the idea of Hrothulf's treachery arose and became canonical under the influence of prestigious English and American scholars, then finds fault with this idea, refuting its "proof" from Saxo Grammaticus and showing how some Anglo-Saxonists have doubted that *Beowulf* supports an interpretation making Hrothulf a murderer. But when the poet's allusions to future treachery are ambiguous, at least for modern readers, in order to exonerate Hrothulf fully one must go to traditions about the Scylding dynasty outside the poem. Scandinavian regnal lists (including one that Saxo himself incorporates) consistently contradict the event the Saxo passage has been used to prove, as they agree on a sequence of Scylding rulers with names corresponding to those of persons in *Beowulf*. Attention to this traditional sequence exposes Hrothulf's

murder of Hrethric as a logical impossibility. Moreover, the early medieval method of selecting rulers suggests that neither did he usurp the throne of Denmark. In sum, careful scrutiny of the best Scandinavian evidence and rejection of the worst reveals *Beowulf's* "treacherous Hrothulf" to be a scholarly fantasy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND DISCLAIMER

Beowulf's victorious fights with the Danish monsters Grendel and his Mother make the young warrior a hero and the poem about him a classic, but behind this "World of Monsters and Myths" looms a less well-known "World of Humans."<sup>1</sup> Human events in the part of the poem taking place in Denmark are focused on the family affairs of the Scylding dynasty in the great hall Heorot built by King Hrothgar, and because Hrothulf is now old, succession to the throne is at stake. Hrothgar appears to be co-ruling with his nephew Hrothulf,<sup>2</sup> but he has two young sons, Hrethric and Hrothmund, and the history of kin-killing for power in northern Europe lends legitimacy to Queen Wealhtheow's concern for their safety (lines 1175-87). Her anxiety gains a poignant context when, within the short compass of 235 lines (1071-1306), the poet refers to three other mothers who lose their sons to violence: Hildeburh, Grendel's mother, and by implication Eve (Cain is mentioned in lines 1261-63). Some late nineteenth-century scholars found in this powerful thematic complex of succession, maternal anxiety, and kin-killing an implied tale of murder destined to take place after Beowulf has left

Heorot, and a series of ambiguous adverbs seemed to strengthen this reading. Then, with Hrothulf's kinship status and his position of power sitting next to Hrothgar putting him already under suspicion, a passage in Saxo Grammaticus' version of the ancient *Bjarkamál*, unrelated to *Beowulf*, appears to confirm Hrothulf's perfidy by naming him as slayer of a king named Hroerek (Hrethric).

According to the tale that the Danish folklorist Axel Olrik (1864-1917) pieced together from these materials (believing it to be factual), when King Hrothgar dies, his nephew Hrothulf will murder the king's eldest son Hrethric to obtain the throne. This story of dynastic treachery captured the attention of three of the most eminent and influential *Beowulf* scholars of the twentieth century, R. W. Chambers, Kemp Malone, and Fred C. Robinson.<sup>3</sup> Focused on Olrik's development of the story and persuaded by the reference from Saxo, their enthusiasm for the "discovery" of the murder drama led them to overlook the weakness of Olrik's evidence for it. Moreover, none of Saxo's sources<sup>4</sup> confirm that Hrothulf murdered Hrethric; instead, those sources agree that the boy prince outlived his supposed slayer, famous in Scandinavian tradition as Hrolf Kraki, a noble and open-handed giver of rings whose generosity is his defining characteristic.<sup>5</sup>

The argument that follows demonstrates current acceptance of the murder story, then presents passages in *Beowulf* inviting concern about future events in Heorot, Axel Olrik's "discovery" of an impending

murder, and its acceptance by major scholars. The second part aims to dismantle this story, beginning with the supposed proof from *Bjarkamál*. Scholars' increasing doubt that the text of *Beowulf* supports a treacherous Hrothulf comes next, then Icelandic and Danish traditions that suggest a different act of treachery. The main argument exonerating Hrothulf, in the conclusion, shows how closer attention to these Scandinavian sources firmly absolves him from this dynastic murder, while revealing a poet more subtly skilled in use of innuendo about Danish legendary history than the murder story affords. For example, after ominously saying that "an avenger was still [þa gyt] living ... for a long time [lange þrage] after the war-distress" (lines 1256b-58a, Fulk trans.),<sup>6</sup> the poet immediately disambiguates this statement by referring to *Grendles modor* ("Grendel's mother," line 1258b), an avenger on her way to Heorot right now. But it was only the night before that Beowulf killed Grendel.<sup>7</sup> Could another grievance have been smoldering out there in the shadows "for a long time"? The subtlety of such hints may increase our esteem for the poet's skill at innuendo and an audience sufficiently informed and observant to grasp it.

## 2. THE LEGEND AND ITS BEGINNINGS

In his influential mid-century book, *The Art of Beowulf*, A. C. Brodeur speaks of an "imminent outbreak of internecine war among the Danes, and ... the heartbreak in which the hopes of Hrothgar and Wealhtheow must

end.”<sup>8</sup> By the time Brodeur wrote this, the murder of their son causing the king and queen heartbreak was an alleged crime so well established in *Beowulf* scholarship that few felt the need to specify it. For three examples among many, Rolf H. Bremmer refers in 1980 to “the future treachery of Hrothulf as we know it from Scandinavian sources,”<sup>9</sup> Richard North, evoking the emotional aspect of the issue, declares in 2018 that Hrothulf “grows up to betray the family that loves him,”<sup>10</sup> and H. R. Loyn finds it sufficient simply to name “Hrothulf and Hrethric,” he is so confident that from their names alone the “epic ingredients” of the crime he is discussing will be recognized.<sup>11</sup> As John D. Niles says, “Here we have the elements of a fiction, constructed from scattered sources, that has been repeated so often that it has come to take on the semblance of fact.”<sup>12</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, Hrothulf’s alleged murder of his cousin Hrethric had become a story of its own so concrete, and in which distinguished scholars had become so invested, that it was generally accepted without question as part of the Danish legendary history behind *Beowulf*. When Wealhtheow proclaims her certainty (or hope) that her nephew Hrothulf, fostered in Heorot after his father’s death, will treat her sons as generously as he has been treated himself (lines 1180-87), many readers now regard her speech as dramatic irony in view of what they “know” Hrothulf will later do to young Hrethric. He was “less than kind to his cousins,” says Andy Orchard, a major modern *Beowulf* scholar, in 2003.<sup>13</sup> From this alleged murder of her

sons (or son), they imagine Wealhtheow as a tragic victim, helpless and heartbroken.

This domestic drama originates in suggestive passages in *Beowulf* and the poem *Widsith*, supported by apparent Scandinavian analogues. The passages from *Beowulf* are clustered in the banquet scene celebrating victory over Grendel (lines 991-1231). Earlier in the day Hrothgar, relieved that the monster has been slain, has declared that he will adopt Beowulf as a son (lines 946-9). Wealhtheow seizes upon his declaration as an opportunity to settle the issue of succession (lines 1176-80), and the way she does this furnishes the core of what has been developed into the murder plot. Hrothulf's supposed treachery is projected from the queen's speech, from allusions to loss of sons (the sequence in lines 1063-1306a involving Hildeburh, Wealhtheow, and Grendel's Mother), and from three passages containing the adverbs mentioned above, two in *Beowulf* (*penden* at line 1019 and *þa gyt* at line 1164), and one in the poem *Widsith* (*lengest* at line 45).

These three "time" passages used as evidence for the murder story now follow, first in R.D. Fulk's facing-page translations of the two passages from *Beowulf*,<sup>14</sup> then my own translation of the relevant lines from *Widsith*. The three adverbs are emphasized below to facilitate discussion following these translations.

Men of repute seated themselves then on the bench, enjoyed their fill; their resolute kinsmen, Hrothgar and Hrothulf, ceremoniously

quaffed many a mead-cup in the high hall. Heorot's interior was filled with friends; at that time [penden] the Nation-Scyldings did not at all practice treachery (lines 1013-19, Fulk trans.).

Later, Wealhtheow enters the hall where Hrothgar and Hrothulf, in a tableau suggesting more than appears on the surface, are described as "good men": "Then Wealhtheow came forward walking under a golden collar where the two good men sat, nephew and paternal uncle; they were still [pa gyt] joined in friendship, each true to the other" (lines 1162-65a).

The third "time" adverb, *lengest* ("longest") occurs in the poem *Widsith*, in a passage describing a battle in Heorot that is the only place outside of *Beowulf* where that Danish hall is named. The situation is best understood in connection with two passages in *Beowulf* referring to the same battle. Near the beginning of *Beowulf*, when the poet describes Hrothgar building Heorot, he refers to events that will occur in the hall's future: it will burn down, and an important battle will take place there. That "blade-hostility" will be between an unnamed "father- and son-in-law after deadly violence" (lines 84-85a) identified by Beowulf later in the poem. When reporting back to his king Hygelac, he tells him that the Danish king Hrothgar, hoping to settle an ancient feud, intends to wed his daughter Freawaru to the Scylding enemy, Ingeld of the Heathobards, but Beowulf anticipates the failure of that alliance when renewed violence breaks out (lines 2020-69). From his speech we can gather that Ingeld is the hostile son-in-law mentioned so many lines before. The poem *Widsith* confirms this



identification of Ingeld and clarifies the situation further by recalling the battle that Beowulf foresaw:

Hrothwulf and Hrothgar held, the longest [*lengest*],  
 peace together, uncle and nephew,  
 after they drove off the Viking kindred  
 and brought low Ingeld's battle-front,  
 hacked down at Heorot the might of the Heathobards.

(*Widsith* lines 45-49, my translation).

Both times the adverb *lengest* is used in *Beowulf*, at lines 2008 and 2238, it refers to duration, meaning “for the longest time,” as it can be interpreted here in *Widsith*. But some critics perceive an ominous tone: “for the longest time” Hrothgar and Hrothulf held peace together, but then . . . ! Read like this, the sentence means that the two kinsmen remained at peace between themselves *only for so long*, with *lengest* suggesting a temporal limit before hostility took over. In the alternative reading proposed here, the adverb means they worked together to keep the peace *for a very long time*, a feat worth remembering. Placing *lengest* before the verb in translating this line (“Hrothgar and Hrothulf longest held”) enables this more optimistic interpretation: Once they had subdued Ingeld's Heathobards, these two strong co-rulers were powerful enough as a team to ward off potential enemies longer than other rulers might have done.<sup>15</sup> Those who believe that Hrothulf is a traitor choose the portentous “only for so long” interpretation, meaning that peace between these kinsmen will soon fail.

Olrik based his argument, that Hrothulf will seek power through violence as soon as he gets the chance, mainly on Wealhtheow's speeches at the banquet celebrating Beowulf's first victory. In her speech following the "at that time" (*þenden*) passage presented above, "the lady of the Scyldings" responds, in a public performance engaging witnesses,<sup>16</sup> to what she describes as Hrothgar's proposal to adopt Beowulf. (What the king actually says at lines 946b-50a is this: "Now, Beowulf, noblest hero, I will cherish you in my heart as a son. Henceforth observe well this new kinship" [Fulk trans.]) She addresses her speech formally to Hrothgar, choosing for her own purpose to interpret his words in legalistic terms that he might not have intended, then she directs the last part of her speech toward his nephew Hrothulf while still speaking ostensibly to her husband:

"I have been informed that you wished to take the warrior [Beowulf] as your son. Heorot is purged, the bright ring-hall; make use, while you are permitted, of your many blessings, and leave to your family the nation and the rule when you shall go forth to witness the decree of Providence [i.e., when you die]. I know my gracious Hrothulf, that he will treat the young warriors honorably if you, friend of Scyldings, depart the world before he [does]; I expect he will repay our sons with good if he remembers everything, what favors we did to his contentment and to his dignity before, when he was a child" (lines 1175-1187, Fulk trans.).

After bestowing treasures upon Beowulf to honor his victory over Grendel, Wealhtheow calls upon him for further service: “Instruct these boys kindly. For that I shall bear in mind a repayment for you .... Be just in your actions toward my son[s],<sup>17</sup> you who are key to our contentment. Here every man is true to the other, kindly of heart, loyal to his lord; the thanes are in harmony, the people completely ready; the reveling men of the corps do as I ask” (lines 1219b-31, Fulk trans.). Beowulf does not reply now to the queen’s requests, but later, upon leaving Heorot, he does respond. First he promises Hrothgar military aid if needed (line 1834), then he alludes directly to the queen’s request on behalf of her son: “If the lord’s child Hrethric determines to go to the court of the Geats, he will be able to find many friends there; far countries are better visited by whoever will do right for himself” (lines 1836-1839, Fulk trans.). This two-fold response, naming the prince, suggests that Beowulf understands and respects Wealhtheow’s concern for her son’s safety.

Danish scholars were intrigued by these passages that appeared to pertain to their country’s history. In 1898, Gregor Sarrazin called attention to Hrolf (i.e., Hrothulf) slaying someone named Hroerek (a name equivalent to “Hrethric”) in the poem called the *Bjarkamál*<sup>18</sup> — that is, in the ancient and lost Scandinavian heroic poem of ca. 1000 AD as half-reinvented by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin verse.<sup>19</sup> This passage from Saxo is Olrik’s main outside support for his argument in *Rolf Krake og den Ældre Skjölungrække* (1903)<sup>20</sup> that hints of treachery in *Beowulf* pointed at Hrothulf. In Saxo’s

*Bjarkamál*, the hero Hjalti urges the sleeping Danes to awaken as they are under attack by Hiarwarus (*Beowulf's* Heorowearð), and in a digression about a previous battle he describes Hrolf (Hrothulf) as the hero *qui natum Bøki Røricum stravit avari* ("who slew Rørik, son of Bøk the miser" (my trans.)).<sup>21</sup> When Lee M. Hollander translated Olrik's book into English as *The Heroic Legends of Denmark* (1919), his murder story became available to a wider audience of scholars, and R.W. Chambers accepted it with enthusiasm: "It is the great merit of Olrik's study that, under his hands, chaos vanishes; everything falls into place."<sup>22</sup>

Olrik titles his argument about Hrothulf's crime "The Scylding Feud." In the excerpt below, parentheses indicate his clarifications, brackets enclose further clarifying comments, and ellipses show where the argument is curtailed.

The epic of *Beowulf*, which begins by telling of the previous fortunes of the Scyldings—the part, namely, which is supposed to precede the fight with Grendel—contains also an episode in which we are allowed a glance ahead in time to the fates of the Scyldings thereafter and their internecine feuds. This is also the only scene in which Hrothulf appears....<sup>23</sup> [Here Olrik describes the banquet scene celebrating *Beowulf's* victory over Grendel.] But the striking thing is that this scene of peace contains hints of a future catastrophe which is due to internal dissensions among the Scyldings....

The actual course of this feud seems at first sight unknown. However, the queen's speech, aimed at safeguarding the future of her children, points precisely to the side where danger threatens: what is to become of the youths when their old father is deceased? Her words to Hrothulf about the confidence she has in him are not only an expression of her expectation, but clearly also an attempt to bind him by her earnest plea. For no worse danger could threaten than for the warlike chieftain who, while Hrothgar lived, was his co-regent and had himself a claim to the throne, to betray them and pursue his own interests ....

Olrik supports his argument by referring to the Hroerek passage from the *Bjarkamál*:

External testimony confirming the course of events to have been as we surmise is to be found in the later (Danish) tradition according to which King Hroerek (Hrethric [Rørik]) succumbed to Hrolf's (Hrothulf's) superior army although he was the possessor of the golden treasures of the royal castle.<sup>24</sup>

He concludes discussion of "The Scylding Feud" as follows:

To sum up: we have in the Anglo-Saxon Scylding traditions a theme of heroic poetry derived, in the main, from actual events and reflecting them on the whole in a trustworthy fashion.... It is based—most likely—on the greatest domestic conflict in the house of the

Scyldings during the Migration Age, and is elaborated and concentrated so as to form an impressive dramatic action.<sup>25</sup>

Allusive passages in *Beowulf* do hint at dire events to come; the trick is to figure out what these events are. For this it is hard to move past Olrik's confident analysis and Chambers' firm reassertion that "Hrethric, son of Hrothgar, is slain by Hrothulf."<sup>26</sup> Kemp Malone, equally convinced, is especially moved by Wealhtheow's fate: Although she does all she can to find support for Hrethric, "the young prince is doomed, whatever she may do."<sup>27</sup> Malone continues to milk the episode for its "beautiful" tragedy as the peril of her boys "drives the queen to do all that she does .... The poet conceives of them as mere lads, the helpless creatures of circumstance."<sup>28</sup> Of course, following this interpretation of their "peril," Malone compares the two brothers to the famously doomed princes in the tower reputedly murdered by Richard III.

In a supplementary chapter in the 1932 second edition of his book, titled "Recent work on *Beowulf* to 1930," Chambers offers an approving summary of Malone's various arguments that, he says, have resolved his own lingering doubts about Saxo's authority:

The *Bjarkamal* and later Scandinavian sources tell us quite definitely that Hrothulf (*Hrolfr, Roluo*) *did* slay a king named Hrethric (*Hrærekr, Røricus*). There is no doubt as to the correspondence of the names, and that being so, surely the Scandinavian evidence puts the fate of Hrethric beyond doubt.<sup>29</sup>

Chambers introduces the dispossessed prince Heorowearð of line 2161, then continues:

And in the *Bjarkamal* we are definitely told that Hrothulf, after having slain King Hrethric (*Hrærekr*, *Røricus*), was himself slain by Heorowearð (*Hjorvarðr*, *Hiarwarus*), who seized the throne from him.

This is the way in which, following the hints of various earlier scholars, Olrik reconstructed the story. And it is really not theory at all: it is a putting together of two different traditions, the English and the Scandinavian. They interlock, dovetail into one another, and make a connected whole which, though it leaves details obscure, seems in its main outlines established beyond doubt. The Scandinavian stories help us to understand the hints in *Beowulf*: *Beowulf* shows the real bearing upon each other of the *disjecta membra* of Scandinavian tradition.<sup>30</sup>

Because of Olrik's plausible laying out of the post-*Beowulf* story and Chambers' and Malone's excited acceptance of it, even today most *Beowulf* scholars, at least those whose project does not require them to examine the issue closely, take as proven the idea of Hrothulf's imminent violence after Beowulf has slain the monsters and gone home. Even Frederick Klaeber added his authority to this idea in his edition of 1950, asserting that lines 1018-19 are "unquestionably an allusion to Hrothulf's treachery in later times,"<sup>31</sup> and in 1984 Fred C. Robinson far more strongly asserts that anyone who *doesn't* accept this reading (his italics) is a fool turning "a deaf

ear” to the “dark implications” of the text.<sup>32</sup> Robinson wraps up this view by saying, “In the legendary history of Denmark Hrothulf, not Hrethric, takes the Danish throne after Hrothgar, and Saxo Grammaticus notes that this happened only after Hrothulf slew Røricus (= Hrethric). Wealhtheow had good reason to be anxious.”<sup>33</sup>

### 3. BRIEFLY LAYING SOME GHOSTS

In recommending “attention to historical sources,”<sup>34</sup> Robinson refers to Saxo’s passage about “Røricus [Hrethric], Son of Bøk the miser” that Olrik offers as proof that the murder of Hrethric was traditional. Because this Røricus remains an entity in the published text of Saxo’s history, his death at the hand of Hrolf continues to be offered as valid evidence for interpreting *Beowulf*. But Saxo himself created Bøk (inadvertently), and his son Rørik may have been born of an error also.

“Bøk the Miser” may be disposed of most easily because he has existed only in Saxo’s imagination and on his page (where he deceptively lives on, however). His name is linguistically a “ghost word,” arising in this case from a misreading. Olrik credits Gregor Sarrazin for identifying Saxo’s misunderstanding of the element *-bagi* (ring) in the epithet *Hnoggvanbagi* (Ring-Hoarder) as the unusual name Bøk, while rightly associating the compound-element *hnogg* with the adjective *hnøgggr* (miserly).<sup>35</sup> Accepting Sarrazin’s correction, Olrik omits Bøk the Miser in stanza 12 of his “restoration” of the *Bjarkamál* in Danish verse, that Hollander translates as follows:



Let us rally our ranks  
 as Hrolf us taught,  
 the hero who hewed down  
 the ring-hoarder.  
 Wretched was Hrærek  
 though he riches owned:  
 but gold he gathered,  
 not gallant men.<sup>36</sup>

So Bøk is banished, but Hrolf remains to slay someone named Hrærek, now revealed as a ring-hoarder (*Hnoggvanbagi*).<sup>37</sup> Saxo would have found two “Hrethrics” in his Icelandic sources,<sup>38</sup> one a greedy *Hnoggvanbagi* and the other a generous *Slængvanbagi* (ring-giver), and even Ellis Davidson has trouble sorting them out in her notes.<sup>39</sup> It is possible that the ring-hoarder results from an error similar to that creating Bøk, in this case an error occurring when a scribe was copying a manuscript. His eye may have flicked away and returned to an earlier point in the text, so that he copied it twice; the technical term for this is “eyeskip.” When the textual doubling, however it occurred, resulted in two kings needing to be distinguished, the easiest solution would be to give them opposed styles of rule, this in turn making them interesting enough to inspire tales featuring a good king who distributes wealth and a bad king who withholds it.<sup>40</sup> Saxo enjoys tales having a possible relevance to his subject, so he inserts that bad king to give Hrolf, who

lacks military battles until his glorious last stand, a small victory for his followers to celebrate.

Having laid one ghost for certain and another more tentatively, we can now return to the scene in Heorot less encumbered by that “historical” proof from highly creative Saxo.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. DOUBTS ABOUT A PERFIDIOUS HROTHULF

While Wealhtheow may have had “good reason to be anxious” about the succession, some have doubted her sons would be slain by Hrothulf. M.G. Clarke in 1911 was first to question Olrik’s story. In *Sidelights on Teutonic History*<sup>42</sup> she looks closely at that entire encounter in Heorot and Olrik’s discussion of it in order to cull from it what history she can. Taking Olrik to task, she says, “The sole authority of the *Bjarkamál* with its one reference (*qui natum Bøki Røricum stravit avari*) admittedly corrupt, and conceivably pointing to some person other than the Hrethric of *Beowulf*, is not conclusive, and is certainly not a sufficient foundation for the airy erection of hypotheses which Dr. Olrik has built upon it.”<sup>43</sup> Half a century after Clarke, the distinguished Oxford medievalist Kenneth Sisam disputed the story more influentially in *The Structure of Beowulf* (1966).<sup>44</sup> In three brief pages titled “Hrothgar and Hrothulf,” Sisam focuses on those suggestive adverbs. Translating line 1164: *þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere* “then yet was their peaceful relationship (sib) together,” he says, “The words in themselves do not imply treachery on Hrothulf’s part, any more than on Hrothgar’s.”<sup>45</sup> With reference to the *Widsith* passage where the

uncle and nephew *heoldon lengest sibbe ætsomne* “held for the longest time ‘sib’ (peace) together,”<sup>46</sup> Sisam observes reasonably, “There was a natural limit to their alliance, which must end when one or the other died,” and he draws attention to a similar use of *lengest* at line 28 of *Widsith*, *Sigehere lengest Sæ-Denum weold* (“Sigehere for the longest time ruled the Sea-Danes”); “we do not infer that Sigehere was deposed or assassinated.”<sup>47</sup> As for taking *penden* at line 1019 to imply trouble, Sisam says this depends on interpreting the adverb “in the light of two assumptions: that *penden* is contrasted with a particular time of dissension among the Danes which this vague statement brought to the minds of the audience; and that it could only be the time of a final quarrel between Hrothgar and Hrothulf.” After rejecting these assumptions, Sisam concludes:

An interpretation so deeply rooted in modern criticism may seem to be beyond question now. Yet it depends very little on what is known, and very much on assumptions or conjectures, or on favourable inclination [bias] where there is a reasonable doubt. The poet’s comment at the end of the scene in Heorot might be expected to give its keynote. There (1228 ff.) he says unequivocally that the Danes were warlike, disciplined, and good subjects: the last words are *wæs seo þeod tilu*: “that was a good people.”<sup>48</sup>

Morton Bloomfield’s review of this book reads like a sigh of relief: “At the very least, *Structure* will serve as a corrective, especially when Sisam

analyzes the text, to some of the wilder flights of critical and scholarly fancy.”<sup>49</sup> Yet some of the later arguments against the murder of Hrethric, including those based on the text of *Beowulf* alone, are also rather wild. Two examples, related by the theme of Wealhtheow’s “motherhood,” again demonstrate fertile imaginations at work concerning events that occur outside the poem.

In 1984, Helen Damico published the only scholarly book ever dedicated to the queen herself: *Beowulf’s Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*.<sup>50</sup> Its main thesis is that in her cup-bearing role in Heorot Wealhtheow participates in a powerful and assertive female tradition that Damico associates with the Scandinavian valkyrie figure. Damico objects, correctly in my view, to the inclination of previous modern critics from Lawrence to Irving (those she cites are all male) to perceive Wealhtheow as a “woman-victim.” The first part of her argument is a reading of the text that can be justified, even if one disagrees with her interpretation of nuance, as in the following story that she tells concerning Wealhtheow’s speech to Hrothgar about leaving the realm to his kinsmen when he dies. Damico says:

Wealhtheow’s intent in the speech is clear; she implicitly opposes Hrothgar’s wish to adopt Beowulf by making a counterproposal and sponsoring his nephew, Hrothulf, as successor to the Danish throne. The endorsement is astonishing, for not only does it presume a loyalty to Hrothulf that supersedes the queen’s profound

indebtedness to Beowulf, but, as remarked upon earlier (Chap I, p. 8), it obliquely requires that Hrothgar retract his pledge of a *niwe sib* “new kinship” with the Geatish prince (946b-949a). In effect, Wealhtheow is advising her husband to commit what can be interpreted only as a dishonorable act, one that would compromise his role as moral and military leader of the Danish *folc*.... The queen’s action can be reconciled with her character, however, if it is seen (as it is by Schücking) as proposing not a retraction but a modification of the vow: wealth and treasure for Beowulf, and the people’s army and the realm for Hrothgar’s kinsmen.

But Damico introduces a twist in the story that will surprise readers of *Beowulf*: “What is not explained, and what continues to be unsettling, is her choice of Hrothulf over the two princes as successor to the throne.”<sup>51</sup> It is the implication Damico finds in that choice that is surprising, not Wealhtheow’s support for an already experienced ruler (see lines 1162-63) to keep the realm safe. Her explanation for Wealhtheow’s “unsettling” choice is that the queen has a motherly attitude toward Hrothulf because she is, not metaphorically but literally, his birth-mother. Moreover, as Damico goes on to explain, Wealhtheow’s real name is Yrsa.

Here one has to know about the birth of Hrolf Kraki (Hrothulf), a story of incest famous in Scandinavia but not mentioned in *Beowulf*.<sup>52</sup> Sources from the poem *Grottasongr* onward allude to the story, and both Saxo Grammaticus and *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* tell it in detail, with a slight shifting of

family relationships. In *Beowulf* the sons of Healfdene are listed as Heorogar, Hrothgar and Halga, with an unnamed sister who marries a Swedish king (lines 61-63); most scholars accept M. G. Clarke's identification of this sister as Yrsa.<sup>53</sup> The word *suhtorfædran* at line 46 of *Widsith* identifies Hrothulf as Hrothgar's sister's son, and we know from Scandinavian sources that his father is Hrothgar's brother Halga, making Hrothulf the product of an incestuous brother-sister relationship. (The incest was innocent, as neither partner realized their close blood-relationship.<sup>54</sup>) This incestuous birth-story makes Yrsa both Hrothulf's aunt and his mother, and Damico assumes this relationship as she continues her argument in which Wealhtheow is Yrsa: "In the role of aunt-mother, her preference of Hrothulf over both the young princes and Beowulf is made comprehensible, for it is her nephew-son's legal claim to the throne the queen seeks to protect."<sup>55</sup> As evidence for this reading, Damico cites manuscript *sunu* in a phrase that Wealhtheow addresses to Beowulf, *Beo þu sunu minum/ dædum gedefe* "Be thou to my son [singular] gracious in deeds" (lines 1226b-1227a, trans. Damico). She claims that Wealhtheow is referring to her son Hrothulf, and that she does not say *sunu urum* "our son" to include Hrothgar as parent, as she did in reference to *uncran eaferan* "our offspring" previously (at line 1185a) when speaking to the king, because she (as Yrsa) conceived Hrothulf with Halga. But when Wealhtheow refers to *sunu minum*, "my" son instead of "our" son, she is not addressing Hrothgar, as before, but Beowulf. Additional objections

could be made, but Damico seems to recognize this as she distances herself from this strange “aunt-mother” scenario in a later essay on Wealhtheow.<sup>56</sup>

In supporting her “son” Hrothulf, Damico’s Wealhtheow is also protecting her sons by Hrothgar, and this reasonable motive of protecting her children is developed, quite differently, by Mary Dockray-Miller in *Motherhood and Mothering in Anglo-Saxon England*.<sup>57</sup> Dockray-Miller’s reading of these Wealhtheow passages is unusual also and emphasizes the queen’s role as mother, but it does not require identifying one person as someone else. Her simple and reasonable thesis is that Wealhtheow promotes Hrothulf because she “wants to keep her sons off the throne in order to keep them safe.”<sup>58</sup> But rather than protecting her sons against Hrothulf, the source of danger that most scholars perceive, Dockray-Miller sees the queen advancing Hrothulf’s rights against those of Beowulf himself:

She tells Hrothgar to *þinum magum læf folc ond rice*, leave to your kin the folk and the kingdom. The word ‘kin’ is certainly wide enough to include Hroðulf; had she meant their sons specifically, she could have designated them as she does later in her first speech: *uncran eafaran*, the sons of us two, using the dual pronoun to emphasize the bond that she and Hroðgar share.<sup>59</sup>

Dockray-Miller observes that “Michael Drout and John Hill have already noted this intra-familial loyalty of Wealhtheow towards Hrothulf,”<sup>60</sup>

agreeing with them that “for Wealhtheow, Hrothulf is a better successor to Hrothgar than Beowulf.”<sup>61</sup> I also agree with this estimate and will show that experienced Hrothulf is in fact Hrothgar’s *only* likely successor. Dockray-Miller’s basic premise is worthy of serious consideration: Wealhtheow “affirms the primacy of Hrothulf because she wants him to succeed, not because she sees him as a threat of future treachery”<sup>62</sup>

In *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic* (2000), John M. Hill suggests, without reference to anything beyond the poem, that Hrethric is not murdered when his father King Hrothgar dies<sup>63</sup> because he “has sought safety among the Geats, where not even a victorious Hrothulf would dare attack him.”<sup>64</sup> Exploring this idea further in *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf* (2008), Hill shows how the diplomacy displayed first by Wealhtheow then by Beowulf shifts the meaning of these scenes to a higher level. When Wealhtheow responds to her husband’s adoption proposal in her “Heorot is cleansed” speech (implying “so you can go home now, Beowulf”), she urges Hrothgar to leave his kingdom to his kinsmen (*þinum magum*, line 1178b). She does not specify leaving it to their sons, although she mentions them in what she says next. Still ostensibly speaking to Hrothgar, she expresses certainty that Hrothulf will be generous to “our” children (line 1185). She also asks Beowulf to act generously toward her son (singular, line 1227) and concludes by giving the Geat important gifts. Hill explains that by drinking to Wealhtheow’s formal gestures and accepting her gifts Beowulf “acknowledges her desire that he treat her sons with



mainly kindred-kind feeling. [...] The question now arises: will Beowulf eventually act on Hrothgar's wishes or will he accept the role Wealhtheow would have him play in relation to her sons and to herself?"<sup>65</sup> In Hill's analysis of these scenes, Beowulf handles the situation gracefully. Later, about to leave Heorot to return home, he first offers very tactfully to bring men to Hrothgar's aid should they be needed (lines 1826-1835), and then, only now responding to Wealhtheow's twofold request on behalf of her sons (for advice and support at lines 1219-20 and 1226-27), he offers to welcome Hrethric, referring to him specifically, if he comes to the land of the Geats, "because it's good for a young man to travel," or words to that effect. As we saw above, Fulk translates lines 1838b-39, *Feorcyþðe beoð/ selran gesohte þæm þe him selfa deah*, as "Far countries are better visited by whoever will do right for himself," but I think Fulk misses the point here, and that Beowulf carefully crafts this maxim to be bland and ambiguous. Fred C. Robinson suggests that the word *feorcyþðu* that Fulk translates "far countries" can also be translated "'close friends who are afar' (i.e. distant allies)."<sup>66</sup> Thus, without insulting anyone in Heorot by indicating overtly that Hrethric will need protection, Beowulf offers to protect the boy. In doing this, he tactfully negotiates between the two different kinds of kinship that the king and queen have offered. "While not accepting 'adoption' or spiritual kinship," explains Hill, "Beowulf does here establish a 'kinship' of aid, of both direct and collateral support. That kinship does, however, embrace Hrothgar's son in a general amity."<sup>67</sup> Hill finds the whole scene

extraordinary, and Hrothgar thinks so too, when he proclaims, in Hill's paraphrase of lines 1855-57a, that Beowulf "has personally, through his magnificent offer, opened the way to a mutuality of kinship and peace between the people of the Geats and the Spear-Danes." The dynamic has shifted from Hrothgar's wanting to take Beowulf for a son (that is, to cherish him like a son) to Beowulf orchestrating the exchanges to create a new arrangement "of complete mutuality between the two of them and between their peoples."<sup>68</sup>

Hill's recognition of Beowulf's purposeful shifting of the dynamic is the outstanding core of his argument, and I would extend it further. By diplomatically remaining silent at the time of Hrothgar's offer to adopt him (lines 946b-949a) and again at Wealhtheow's request (lines 1219b-20a, 1226b-27a), Beowulf does not allow himself to be seen as Hrothgar's beneficiary and subordinate (as a son in any sense), nor does he agree to do as the queen wishes, which would be impolitic since she has set up her request in opposition to what she chooses to interpret as Hrothgar's adoption plan. Instead, Beowulf waits until exactly the correct moment some 600 lines later. Then, with one foot out the door, he offers military support to Hrothgar, putting him first as is appropriate, and after that he offers the queen a promise in lines 1836-8 that responds to the second part of her two-fold request in lines 1219-27: to be *dædum gedefe* ("appropriate in deeds": i.e., useful when needed?) to her son, singular, referring to Hrethric. In his comforting assurance of Hrethric's welcome, truly a "speech

as gift,”<sup>69</sup> Beowulf reciprocates the valuable physical gifts that Queen Wealhtheow has lavished upon him.<sup>70</sup> It is an adroit and gracious maneuver by which he shows himself as kindly disposed toward the two royal Danes while firmly displaying his own autonomy.<sup>71</sup>

##### 5. LOCATING HRETHRIC IN CHRONICLES AND KINGLISTS<sup>72</sup>

Hill’s picture of amity in Heorot is in high contrast to Brodeur’s vision of “the failure of the alliance between Danes and Geats” and Robinson’s harsher vision of internal strife. Both scholars, when imagining dynastic murder leading to “the extinction of the Danish kingdom,”<sup>73</sup> point to these words by Chambers as authority: “By rather complicated, but quite unforced, fitting together of various Scandinavian authorities, we find that Hrothulf deposed and slew Hrethric.”<sup>74</sup> But Chambers does force his argument. To support Saxo’s *Bjarkamál* story of the “Roluo who laid low Røricus,” he finds in the Icelandic kinglist called *Langfeðgatal* a Hrærekr whom he identifies as Hrethric, “given as a king of Denmark about the time of Roluo”:

This Røricus or Hrærekr who was slain by Roluo [Hrothulf] was then, himself, a king of the Danes and must have preceded Roluo on the throne. But in that case Røricus *must* be son of Roe [Hrothgar], and identical with his namesake Hrethric, the son of Hrothgar in *Beowulf*. For no one but a son of King Roe could have had such a claim to the throne as to rule between that king and his all powerful nephew Roluo.

To accommodate his argument Chambers must alter the *Langfeðgatal* list:

The succession given in Landfeðgatal is Halfdan, Helgi and Hroar, Rolf, Hrærek: it should, of course, run Halfdan, Helgi and Hroar, Hrærek, Rolf. Hrærek has been moved from his proper place in order to clear Rolf of any suspicion of usurpation... It is difficult, perhaps, to state this argument in a way which will be convincing to those who are not acquainted with Saxo's method of working. To those who realize how he treats his sources, it will be clear that Røricus is the son of Roe, and is slain by Roluo. Translating the words into their Old English equivalents, Hrethric, son of Hrothgar, is slain by Hrothulf.<sup>75</sup>

At this point Chambers' own argument mirrors his understanding of Saxo's method that he disparages. Moreover, he asks us to believe him on trust:

"To those who realize how [Saxo] treats his sources, it will be clear . . ."

What is clear is Chambers' certainty that the succession in neither Saxo nor the *Langfeðgatal* is to be trusted except as he revises it, and that it would be best just to take him at his word, several times repeated: Hrethric is slain by Hrothulf.

This type of argumentation is unusual for Chambers, who normally takes care to be better informed. If he had looked carefully at several Scandinavian kinglists, he would have seen that the *Langfeðgatal* order of kings corresponds to other such lists, as does Saxo's order. Each inserts additional or repeated kings without affecting the basic order of kings and co-rulers important here, with Helgi and Ro (Halga and Hrothgar) followed

by Hrolf Kraki (Hrothulf), then usually Hiorvard (Heoroweard), and finally Røric (Hrethric). The Icelandic scholar Bjarni Guðnasson echoes Chambers' view that Saxo is a problematic witness: his "roll of kings is completely chaotic."<sup>76</sup> But if one ignores the extra kings, Saxo seems to follow the regnal order in the (lost) twelfth-century *Skjoldunga Saga*. Arngrímur Jónsson's Latin epitome of this saga gives the following list, with the kings numbered in the manuscript as below, breaking off after king number 24. Bracketed comments are mine.

1 Scioldus

....

20. Brothers Ingialldus and Halfdanus

21. Brothers Helgo and Roas [sons of Halfdanus]

22. Rolpho Krag [Hrolf Kraki, son of Helgo]

23. Hjørvardus [an outsider married to Hrolf's half-sister]

24 "Rolf's kinsman" Ræricus

To this list may be compared the list of kings extracted from Saxo's Books II and III. Parentheses contain comments by Saxo. Names are anglicized by Fisher in his translation.

Skiold

...

Haldan [i.e., Halfdanus]

Roe and Helgi

Rolf

Hjarvarth

Høther (“qualified to rule by ancestral right, if one traced back his family tree correctly”—Saxo<sup>77</sup>)

Rørik (his son)<sup>78</sup>

The twelfth-century Icelandic *Langfeðgatál* consulted by Chambers simplifies the sequence to Skioldr [...], Halfdan, Hroar and Helgi, Rolf Kraki (Hrothulf), Hrærekr (Hrethric), though it doubles up other sequences. With or without other kings sandwiched in between Rolf and Rørik (Høther is inserted in Saxo’s list and Hjarvarth is omitted in *Langfeðgatál*), all three of these medieval Scandinavian kinglists place Rørik after Rolf (i.e., Hrethric after Hrothulf), as do Sven Aggeson (ca. 1185), under the name “Rokil,” and the Codex Runica (ca.1300?), naming him “Roprik” and identifying him as Høther’s son.<sup>79</sup> Hrothulf (Rolf) would have succeeded Hrothgar (Hroar) because he was the best choice for king at the time that Hrothgar died, having had the experience of ruling alongside his uncle “for a very long time” (*lengest*). After Hrothulf is slain, most sources have him succeeded by Heorowearð [O.N. Hjarvarðr]. Then, as the last-listed Scylding, Hrethric comes to the throne, by now mature and experienced enough to be chosen king. “Chosen” is an operative word here (cp. *Beowulf* lines 1850-51).

## 6. KING CHOICE AND *FACENSTAFAS*

The trouble with dark hints is that, while their “darkness” implies danger, the fact that they are hints means they’re ambiguous. *Facenstafas* (line 1018) clearly refers to malice; perhaps Hrothulf is implicated because

at line 1017 he is right there and highly visible as opposed to Heoroweard, mentioned once only in distant line 2161. That other Danish prince seems to lurk in deep shadow even in the poet's mind. In the later *Hrolf Kraki's Saga*, where Heoroweard becomes visible under the Scandinavian name Hjorvarðr, his nationality is changed so that he is no longer a Scylding, thus few Anglo-Saxonists have thought of him as a contributor to that dynasty's fall.<sup>80</sup>

Several scholars do, however, worry about Heoroweard being passed over when his cousin Hrothgar, son of a younger brother, comes to the throne instead of him.<sup>81</sup> At that time in northern Europe the right of succession to a throne, while restricted, was not based on primogeniture as in Europe today.<sup>82</sup> More sensibly, the succession typically went to a competent adult male within the ruling kin-group, chosen or ratified by a council of elders. Rule would be conferred upon the prince most able to enhance the dynasty's honor and glory by achieving military success and creating a site of fellowship as Hrothgar does, a leader strong enough to preserve his group's independent identity and enable them to prosper. William Cooke explains this early Germanic approach to king choice, and relates it to *Beowulf*:

To appreciate the situation at Hrothgar's court when Beowulf pays his visit, we must begin by understanding that kingship in the ancient Germanic world did not invariably pass from father to son. Kingship was dynastic, in the sense that the right to rule belonged to a particular

family, but it was also elective, in that the late king's senior henchmen [followers] had the right to choose the member or members of the royal house whom they judged fittest to succeed. If the late king's eldest son was full grown and capable, he had a particularly strong claim to their consideration. But the king had to be the real ruler of the nation in peace and its real leader in war, and accordingly, if he died leaving only sons who were underage, it was virtually certain that the magnates would pass them over in favor of some older prince of the blood.<sup>83</sup>

According to this theory of kingship, on the death of Hrothgar, the elected male would be experienced Hrothulf rather than untried young Hrethric, especially if Hrothgar and Hrothulf were already acting as joint rulers, as Klaeber imagines them."<sup>84</sup>

The historian Barbara Yorke, writing about succession in early Kent where "shared rule was the norm," comments, "The junior king can be seen succeeding to the senior position in a number of instances and the examples could probably be multiplied if we had better evidence for the first three quarters of the seventh century."<sup>85</sup> When Wealhtheow asks Hrothulf to treat her sons well, she expects him to take over the throne as sole ruler. If Sisam and Hill (and I) are correct in our interpretations above of the ambiguous words *penden* and *þa gyt*, or even if one interprets them as implying temporal limits, there is no reason to assume, as so many do, that Hrothulf will be going on a rampage to exterminate his cousins in order to grab personal power. As co-ruler, he already has that power.



Even with succession uncontested, however, strife darkly hinted remains smoldering. *Something* is making the poet and his people in Heorot uneasy. If the poet is correct at lines 1017b-18a that “Heorot within was filled with friends” (now), and if Wealhtheow’s words at line 1228 are accurate, “Here every man is true to the other” (right here, right now), then someone must be missing, fomenting those *facenstafas* of line 1018b. That word does appear to refer to dynastic dysfunction, but perhaps at more distance than has been generally thought and not involving those Scyldings celebrating in Heorot “at this time” (line 1019), whom the poet in his own voice confirms are *þeod tilu*, “a good people” (line 1250), loyal and “good” in the sense of being effective, prepared against attack (lines 1242-50). The Latin *Chronicon Lethrense* (ca 1170) tells how Hrothgar (King Ro) “lived in such peace that no man drew a sword against him, nor did he himself lead any expedition abroad.”<sup>86</sup> In this “worthy feat” interpretation of his lengthy kingship (cp. the *Widsith* adverb *lengest*), after their battle with the Heathobards, Hrothgar and Hrothulf will continue in long friendship until elderly Hrothgar dies and Hrothulf becomes king. Even after that, according to the centuries-later *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga*, Hrolf (Hrothulf) continues to sustain that peace: “A long time passed during which King Hrolf and his champions stayed peacefully in Denmark, and no one attacked them.”<sup>87</sup> What several medieval writers appear to find of primary interest about these strong Scylding rulers is the length of time they managed to keep the peace. That remarkable “long peace” that *Widsith* and the saga admire

may have been broken by an act of violence that occurs, not imminently when the hall is still full of friends, but long afterwards. Howell D.

Chickering, Jr., suggests a double view of events in Heorot, the limited view of the Danes, unable to anticipate even the imminent violence of Grendel's Mother (see lines 1233b-35), and "the poet's knowledge of future events."<sup>88</sup> These include events quite far off. If such a double perspective is in play here, the irony is that, while Wealhtheow is anxious about danger to her son, and scholars identify that danger as Hrothulf, it is Hrothulf himself, slain in later times by a Scylding kinsman, whom the *facenstafas* threaten.

The poem *Beowulf* may barely allude to "The Tale of Heorowearð," but that implied story is filled in by Saxo Grammaticus and in the later *Hrólfr Kraki's Saga*, each revising it according to a different agenda. From *Beowulf* we only gather that, for reasons not given, Heorogar judged his son inappropriate for the succession (lines 2160-62), even though, by strict primogeniture, Heorowearð should have been made king instead of King Heorogar's nephew Hrothgar, a situation that parallels Hrothgar succeeded by his nephew Hrothulf over his son Hrethric. The next part of the story is imagined by Charles W. Kennedy, who gets the attack from the saga and the retribution from Saxo:

The long-brooding, slighted Heorowearð struck at last. With a small following of Danes augmented by a Swedish force, he attacked and killed Hrothulf and set fire to the hall. But in the very moment of triumph, and in the act of receiving the oath of

homage, Heorowearð was stabbed to death by a surviving follower of Hrothulf, and amid the smoke of the burning hall the Scylding dynasty came to its end.<sup>89</sup>

The story may not end here, however. In the next part, omitted in the saga where the dynasty does seem to go up in smoke, after Heorowearð famously rules for half a day and is slain in turn, Saxo next slips in Høther, a euhemerized god whom Saxo legitimizes as a Scylding, and at some point after Heorowearð, Røric (Hrethric) finally ascends the throne of Denmark. The basic sequence Hrothulf, Heorowearð, Hrethric (following Saxo but confirmed by other sources) provides the simplest and least tragic of possible interpretations of what happens in Heorot after the good king Hrothgar dies. Why the poet should present Heorowearð's *facenstafas* so obliquely is unclear, but once Hrothulf is absolved, every hint points toward that thwarted prince as the human shadow in Heorot, biding his time. According to Dorothy Whitelock, the poet

has only to mention Heorowearð's name—and he goes out of his way to do so—and the whole of the final act of the Scylding drama would leap into his audience's minds, one of the most famous events in northern story, which gave rise to the Old Norse poem, the *Bjarkamál*, namely the slaying of Hrothulf by his cousin Heorowearð, in spite of a magnificent stand made by his followers."<sup>90</sup>

The argument of this essay is not intended as proof absolving *Beowulf's* Hrothulf of murder. This alleged crime or its absence, despite vividly inhabiting the imaginations of distinguished scholars, lies outside the scope of the poem.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, the most likely story about Hrethric among the many proposed, and best conforming to what the poet actually says, is a version where the young prince waits outside the circle of violence, perhaps among Beowulf's Geats, learns the ethics and skills of leadership, achieves honor, and in due course becomes king. While it may be correct to say that "Hrothulf, not Hrethric, takes the Danish throne after Hrothgar," he does not have to kill Hrethric to do it. But far more compelling evidence against that murder than Hrothulf's lack of motive is the agreement among Scandinavian kinglists that Hrethric outlives him.

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Keywords: *Beowulf*, Hrothulf, Hrethric, Axel Olrik, allusions misread, Scylding dynasty, dynastic murder, kinglists.

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These titles are from the introduction to *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto, 2008), xxxvi and li. References to the text of *Beowulf* are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Hrothulf is the son of Hrothgar's brother Halga, with whom Hrothgar has co-ruled earlier (according to Scandinavian sources). On the death of Halga, the king and queen fostered his son Hrothulf (lines 1186-87). His story is told in colorful detail in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, translated as *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* by Jesse Byock (London, 1998), hereafter cited in notes as HKS (for "Hrolf Kraki's Saga").

<sup>3</sup>There is no intention here to disparage the intelligence of those who taught us so much about the poem, but even the brilliant can blunder, and in this particular case they have. The publications in which these three scholars most influentially embraced the idea of Hrothulf as murderer are as follows: R.W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, published by the Cambridge University Press with a first edition in 1921, a second in 1932, and a third with appendices by C.W. Wrenn in 1960. Kemp Malone published his article "Hrethric" in *PMLA* (1927), 268-313), and Fred C. Robinson discusses the issue in "History, Religion, Culture," *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger, Jr., and Robert F. Yeager (Modern Language Association of America, 1984), 107-122.

<sup>4</sup> According to Hilda Ellis Davidson, "The main source used by Saxo was probably the lost *Skjoldunga Saga*" (*Saxo Grammaticus: History of the Danes*,

*Books 1-1X*, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, trans. Peter Fisher (Cambridge, 1998), Vol. I, 39. (Vol. I contains Fisher's English text and Vol. II Davidson's Commentary, both within one cover.) Saxo's *History* is cited hereafter as "Saxo." His sources are listed in further detail in note 38 below.

<sup>5</sup> Hrolf's generosity is described in Chapter 15 of HKS (Byock, 31).

<sup>6</sup> R. D. Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts and The Fight at Finnsburg* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 169. I have elected to use Fulk's translation as an independent witness to avoid biasing my own translation to favor my argument. Fulk affirms that "the translation in nearly all respects accords with the interpretations offered in *Klaeber's Beowulf* " (xxi). For the original texts see Fulk's facing page (here, p. 168) or *Klaeber's Beowulf*, cited above (n. 1).

<sup>7</sup> In their note on *lange þrage* (line 1257b), the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf* observe that "the story does not bear out this remark" (196-7), and they list suggestions made for emendation and justification.

<sup>8</sup> *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, 1959), 117.

<sup>9</sup> "The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in *Beowulf*," *Amsterdam Beiträge zur Alterun Germanistik* 15 (1980), 38.

<sup>10</sup> "Hrothulf's Childhood and Beowulf's: A Comparison," *Childhood and Adolescence in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*, ed. Susan Irvine and Winfried Rudolf (Toronto, 2018), 243.

<sup>11</sup> H. R. Loyn, "Kinship in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon England* 3 (1974), 202.

<sup>12</sup> "History and Myth," *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, NE, 1997), 226.

<sup>13</sup> *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Woodbridge, 2003), 220.

<sup>14</sup> *The Beowulf Manuscript*, 153, 163, 165, 167. (See note 6 above.)

<sup>15</sup> Jacqueline Simpson may have this idea in mind when she avoids hinting at enmity between these kinsmen in her translation of these lines from *Widsith*: “Very long did Hroðwulf and Hroðgar, nephew and uncle, keep peace as kinsmen together” (*Beowulf and its Analogues*, ed. G.N. Garmonsway, Jacqueline Simpson, and Hilda Ellis Davidson [London, 1968], 127).

<sup>16</sup> In *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, Seamus Heaney changes the scene’s dynamic when at lines 1161-62 he has the queen sit between Hrothgar and Hrothulf in a position of intimacy, a position that suggests she is speaking quietly for them alone (New York, 2000: 83). She does not sit in the original; I imagine her speaking to the king, with especial attention to Hrothulf, in a calm but penetrating voice as she stands before the warriors in the hall, making sure there are witnesses to what she says.

<sup>17</sup> Literally, *sunu* “son.” After Wealhtheow’s request to Beowulf to “instruct these boys [cnyhtum] kindly” at lines 1219b-1220a, Fulk, following Klaeber, translates her phrase *sunu minum* at 1226b “my sons,” even though *sunu* is singular and may refer to Hrethric in particular. Beowulf takes it that way later at lines 1536-39. The singular form in the manuscript is central to Helen Damico’s argument, summarized below, that Wealhtheow’s word *sunu* refers to Hrothulf.

<sup>18</sup> Sarrazin, “Rolf Krake und sein Vetter im Beowulfliede,” *Englische Studien* 24 (1898), 144-45.

<sup>19</sup> Saxo .Vol. I, 56-63, in Fisher’s translation from Saxo’s Latin.

<sup>20</sup> *Rolf Krake og den Ældre Skjolungrække* (Copenhagen, 1903) is available as a searchable e-book at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112124390763;view=1up;seq=5>. It is Part I of Olrik’s larger work, *Danmarks Heltedigtning: En Oldtidsstudie* (Copenhagen, 1910). Lee M. Hollander translated Part I with Olrik’s collaboration as *The Heroic Legends of Denmark* (New York, 1919), hereafter cited as *Legends*.

<sup>21</sup> *Legends*, 112. Following his “restoration” (his term) of Saxo’s poem to a version more like the original as he imagines it (*Legends* 90-98), Olrik usefully provides Saxo’s Latin version with “materials and parallels” on facing pages (*Legends*, 99-136).

<sup>22</sup> Chambers, *Introduction*, 444.

<sup>23</sup> Olrik, *Legends*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Olrik, *Legends*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Legends*, 64-65. Olrik’s discussion of these matters is the main force behind the idea that the Scyldings (though not Scyld himself) had some claim to a historical identity. Chambers powerfully endorsed his view, saying that Hrethric was “almost certainly an actual historic prince who was thrust from the throne by Hrothulf” (*Introduction*, 26).

<sup>26</sup> Chambers, *Introduction*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> “Hrethric,” 271.

<sup>28</sup> “Hrethric,” 271.

<sup>29</sup> Chambers, *Introduction*, 426, his emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> *Introduction*, 426-427.

<sup>31</sup> 3rd edition, 169, note on lines 1018-19. After discussing Hrothulf and then the Heathobard feud (xxxi - vi), Klaeber concludes: “Thus the two tragic motives of this epic tradition are the implacable enmity between two tribes [the Scyldings and the Heathobards], dominated by the idea of revenge which no human bonds of affection can restrain, and the struggle for the crown among members of a royal family [which is to lead to the extinction of the dynasty]” (xxxvi, his brackets). The editors of *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, less committed to the “Scylding feud” idea than Klaeber was, list six modern scholars who doubt Hrothulf’s crime (*Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 177, note on lines 1017-19).



<sup>32</sup> *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (Oxford, 1993), 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Tomb*, 38. As I cannot find where “Saxo Grammaticus notes that this happened only after Hrothulf slew Røricus” (*Tomb*, 38), it seems Robinson is merely echoing Chambers.

<sup>34</sup> *Tomb*, 38.

<sup>35</sup> See *Legends*, 73-74 and notes. Sarrazin corrects the mistake in “Rolf Krake,” 144-45.

<sup>36</sup> *Legends*, 92. Olrik himself warned about the *Bjarkamál* that “the present reader is in the beggarly position of one who must form a conception of the old poem with the help of a Latin translation [Saxo’s], a second-hand narrative [Olrik’s own], and some few detached verses” (Olrik, *Legends*, 85), and Davidson further warns that “Olrik’s [*Bjarkamál*] poem largely consists of ingenious conjectures, with little evidence to support them” (Saxo, Vol II, 47, n57).

<sup>37</sup> Olrik pointed out that killing a king who withheld his treasure would not be a dishonorable act in medieval Scandinavia (*Legends*, 72-73). Hoarding wealth was considered contrary to one of the primary principles of good kingship, in which the king is meant to reward his warriors for valor and his bards for skillful praise of valor. See Bede’s concern for defense of the Northumbrian kingdom when this practice is lost, in his “Letter to Egbert,” translated in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, The Greater Chronicle, and Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford, 1994), 343-357.

<sup>38</sup> On the whole Saxo follows identifiable authorities such as the lost eleventh-century original behind *Resen’s Vellum* and the twelfth-century kinglists of *Skjoldungasaga* and *Langfedgatál*. In “The Earliest Icelandic Genealogies and Regnal Lists,” *Saga-Book XXIX* (2005), 115-119, Anthony Faulkes says that the *Resen’s Vellum* list represents “the earliest stage of royal genealogy in Icelandic

prose sources" (116). The also-lost Icelandic *Skjoldunga Saga* is only extant in a seventeenth-century epitome in Latin by Arngrímur Jónsson, translated as "Fragments of Danish History" by Clarence Miller in *ANQ* 20 (Summer 2007), 9-33.

<sup>39</sup> See Ellis Davidson's notes in *Saxo* Vol. II: note 64, p. 48, and later note 52 (sic), p. 58.

<sup>40</sup> The stingy ring-hoarder is a potent source of story. Saxo inserts Rørik son of avaricious Bøk into his *Bjarkamál* as an enemy for Hrolf Kraki to defeat, and the HKS author reverses the positive meaning of *slængvanbagi* to create the unpleasant tale of envious Hrok, who slings Hrolf's most precious ring far into the ocean (chapter eight). In each tale, Hrolf *does* kill or mutilate an unethical "Hræric," but in neither story is that person a Skjolding and Hrok is not even a king.

<sup>41</sup> See Davidson's warning about Olrik's poem in note 36 above; Saxo's version of the *Bjarkamál* in Latin hexameters is equally dubious as representing its source. (Both poems might gain critical value if considered "creative" works in response to the aesthetics of their period instead of translations.)

<sup>42</sup> Cambridge, 1911.

<sup>43</sup> *Sidelights*, 100-101.

<sup>44</sup> (Oxford, 1965), 80-82.

<sup>45</sup> Sisam, *Structure.*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> For this understanding of *sibbe*, compare *Beowulf* lines 154b-56, where Grendel *sibbe ne wolde* ("wished no peace/relationship") with the Danes.

<sup>47</sup> *Structure*, 81.

<sup>48</sup> *Structure*, 81-82.

<sup>49</sup> "The Structure of *Beowulf* by Kenneth Sisam," *Essays and Explorations* (Cambridge, 1970), 278.

<sup>50</sup> Madison, 1984.

<sup>51</sup> *Wealhtheow*, 127; the bracketed explanation in the longer section is mine.

<sup>52</sup> See James Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*: Haunted by Incest," *PMLA* 125 (2010), 289–305.

<sup>53</sup> Clarke, *Sidelights*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> Saxo's version of this liaison is in Vol I, 51 (see note 4 above), and HKS retells it in chapters 7 and 10 (trans. Byock).

<sup>55</sup> Damico, *Wealhtheow*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps realizing that if *Wealhtheow* is Yrsa, her marriage to Hrothgar, Yrsa's brother in *Beowulf* (lines 62-63), creates a problem, Damico omitted her Yrsa theory in "The Valkyrie Reflex in Old English Literature," *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, 1990), 176-190, cp. viii.

<sup>57</sup> New York, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Dockrey-Miller, *Motherhood*, 106.

<sup>59</sup> *Motherhood* , 111.

<sup>60</sup> She cites John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), 75; and Michael D.C. Drout, "Imitating Fathers: Tradition, Inheritance, and the Reproduction of culture in Anglo-Saxon England," PhD dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, May 1997. Drout argues that *Wealhtheow* supports Hrothgar's claim to the throne because her boys have no chance of succeeding to it and surviving ("Imitating Fathers," 238).

<sup>61</sup> *Motherhood*, 112.

<sup>62</sup> *Motherhood*, 113.

<sup>63</sup> Presumably he dies of old age (see lines 1307 and 1769-70). That *har hilderinc* "gray-haired warrior" of line 1307 is hale enough, however, to join sometime later

with his nephew Hrothulf in fighting the Heathobards when they attack Heorot (*Widsith*, lines 45-49). The editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf* comment on a "lack of biographical verisimilitude" in the way Hrothgar's life is depicted (liii).

<sup>64</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic* (Gainsville, 2000), 72.

<sup>65</sup> *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf: Arrivals and Departures* (Toronto, 2008), 49-50.

<sup>66</sup> *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), 5.

<sup>67</sup> Hill, *Pulse*, 58.

<sup>68</sup> Hill, *Pulse*, 59.

<sup>69</sup> This is Robert E. Bjork's term: "Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 69 (1994): 993-1020.

<sup>70</sup> George Clark observes that Beowulf's speech here can be understood as a diplomatically delayed "answer to Wealhtheow's petition which the queen should have approved and which Hrothgar receives with deep gratitude" (*Beowulf* [Boston,, 1990], 89).

<sup>71</sup> Interpreting this scene similarly, Peter S. Baker sees Beowulf taking charge of his identity and position in relation to his hosts in Heorot (*Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* [Woodbridge, 2013], 71). In Hill's understanding of these speeches and scenes, everyone present in Heorot is poised, graceful, and regal. This courtly goodwill even extends to Hrothgar's tears at Beowulf's departure: neither effeminate (Dockray-Miller's suggestion in "Beowulf's Tears of Fatherhood," *Exemplaria* 10 [1998]: 1-28), nor a sign of senility (Olrik, *Legends*, 54), but rather "the emotional deepening of *gravitas*" (Hill, *Pulse*, 64). For a sophisticated analysis developing a view similar to Hill's, see Benjamin A. Saltzman, "Secrecy and the Hermeneutic Potential in *Beowulf*," *PMLA* 133 (2018): 42-44.

<sup>72</sup> Anglo-Saxon chroniclers, unlike the *Beowulf* poet, show no interest in the Scyldings from Hrothgar to Hrethric, although overlap with the Scandinavian genealogies occurs before and after them. As Audrey Heaney observes, “From Halfdan/Healfdene onwards, it appears to be purely Danish traditions which *Beowulf* is following, in an earlier form than that in the extant Scandinavian sources” (“Scyld Scefing and the Dating of *Beowulf* -- Again,” *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England: Thomas Northcote Toller and the Toller Memorial Lectures*, ed. Donald Scragg [Cambridge, 2003], 35). Craig R. Davis explains how the Anglo-Saxon dynastic lists originated and then were typically expanded backwards into a pseudo-history populated ever more extravagantly by euhemerized gods in *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Heroic Legend* (New York, 1996), 51-63. Scandinavian lists were also expanded creatively but with different emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> *The Art of Beowulf*, 77.

<sup>74</sup> Chambers, *Introduction*, 26.

<sup>75</sup> Chambers, 26-27 and 26 n. 3. Dockray-Miller also observes this tampering in *Motherhood*, 109.

<sup>76</sup> “The Icelandic Sources of Saxo Grammaticus,” in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen (Copenhagen, 1981), 88.

<sup>77</sup> Saxo, Vol. I, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Saxo, Vol. I, 50-79 (trans. Davidson). When a king’s genealogy is unclear, makers of regnal lists often assume that he is the son of the king preceding him. Sven Aggesen (fl. ca. 1185) lists every succeeding king as son of his predecessor, as in “Halfdan’s son Helghi – his son Rolf Kraki – his son Rokil [Hrethric] – his son Frothi the Bold – his son Wermund the Wise – his son Uffi [Offa]”: *The Works of*

Sven Aggesen, *Twelfth-Century Danish Historian*, trans. Eric Christiansen (London, 1992), 49-50. Wermund and Uffi appear in *Beowulf* as Garmund and Offa (lines 1948-62), but not as kings of Denmark.

<sup>79</sup> See note 78. *Klaeber's Beowulf* (pp. 301-5) includes the relevant lists of kings in these six chronicles with text and translation: *Langfeðgatal*, *Chronicon Lethrense*, Sven Aggesen, *Codex Runicus*, *Annales Ryenses*, *Skjoldungasaga*. The first, third, and sixth passages selected from these chronicles show Hrethric following Hrothulf (at some point); the other three texts are either editorially curtailed after the death of Hrolf Kraki (Hrothulf) or contain ellipses where Hrethric's name may occur, as in the *Codex Runicus*. Alexander M. Bruce's agenda in *Scyld and Scef: Expanding the Analogues* (New York, 2002) similarly leads him to abbreviate the lists that he usefully provides in "Part II: Texts and Translations," at one point concluding with "Rolf" (Hrothulf) immediately before the equivalent of Hrethric's name would appear (140). Bruce does however provide both lists from *Langfeðgatal* in Latin and English (115-17).

<sup>80</sup> As Sam Newton says, "Although [Heoroweard] is not actually named in the episode of the victory-feast in *Beowulf*, he may be implicitly invoked through the later descriptions of his father's war-gear" (*Origins*, 88). William Cooke uses the support of Scandinavian sources to argue that the hints of future disaster in Heorot refer to the future battle with Heoroweard ("Hrothulf: A Richard III, or an Alfred the Great?" *Studies in Philology* 104 [2007], 184).

<sup>81</sup> W. W. Lawrence alludes to this primogeniture understanding as he concludes his own "murder of Hrethric" story by describing Heoroweard, who follows "treacherous" Hrothulf, as "the rightful heir to the throne, according to strict succession" (*Beowulf and Epic Tradition* [Cambridge, MA., 1930], 78-79).

<sup>82</sup> David N. Dumville explains: “Legal title ... was naturally very important. It was one of those elements which enabled a man to be a candidate for the throne.... And in our period legal title was normally, though not invariably, established by descent. Royal genealogy may be expected to state that claim, often retrospectively, and it need have no necessary relationship with biological fact” (“Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists,” *Early Medieval Kingship*, eds. P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood [Leeds, 1977], 73). Frederick M. Biggs understands “*Beowulf*’s central theme [as] a contrast in two models of succession”: the old one where “the next king is chosen from among a relatively broadly-defined kin group,” and the newer model where “the pool of eligible candidates is restricted primarily to sons” (“The Politics of Succession in *Beowulf* and in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Speculum* 80 [2005], 710).

<sup>83</sup> “Hrothulf,” 175-176.

<sup>84</sup> *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, *op. cit.*, liii, not a new suggestion; see Olrik above. Several kinglists show or imply Hrothgar ruling with his brother Halga (as Ro and Helgi). In *Beowulf*, where Halga is now dead, his warrior-son Hrothulf apparently occupies his place.

<sup>85</sup> “Joint Kingship in Kent c. 560 to 785,” *Archaeologia Cantiana* 99 (1983): 1-20 (at 17).

<sup>86</sup> Simpson’s translation in *Beowulf and its Analogues*, 128.

<sup>87</sup> Byock trans, 69.

<sup>88</sup> *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition* (New York, 1977), 322. Questioning whether allusion should be read “at face value, or do we allow for an artful irony?” Chickering suggests the problem may be resolved by a double perspective that combines the limited knowledge of those in the poem with the larger understanding of the poet, aware of events in their future.

<sup>89</sup> Kennedy, *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic: Translated into Alliterative Verse with a Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 1940), xxxiv.

<sup>90</sup> *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), 36; cp. Roberta Frank, "Germanic Legend in Old English Literature," *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cambridge, 2013), 97.

<sup>91</sup> What "really happened" to the Hrethric of *Beowulf* depends on how he inhabits the mind of the poet. Both the *Beowulf* poet and Shakespeare have the authority to do as they like in the world of their fiction, to murder whom they will whatever the chroniclers say. The chroniclers say that Hamlet lived on too.